

Museum at Home Week 4

### **From the rubbish tip**

#### **GARDEN ARCHAEOLOGY**

The Devon bank that is the boundary between garden and lane is wide and high, topped mainly with a mixture of native hedging. Rain and animals move through it penetrating moss, ferns, nettles and snowdrops, occasionally revealing 'rubbish' incorporated into the mound of stone and earth. This rubbish includes cooking pots, a frying pan, a ceramic hot water bottle. More recent deposits may be lodged in the twigs and branches above: binder twine, carrier bags, plastic drink bottles, crisp packets, thrown from cars or escaped on bin day. I gather these up for the landfill bin.

In the corner furthest from the house the bank slopes down steeply into a boggy area shaded by hazels and an oak tree. When making planting pockets for snowdrops I discovered this section was shored up with a bicycle frame and an iron bedstead. It seemed wise to leave the bicycle and to anchor it with more stone. The best part of the bed was put into the garage, with the intention of using it as the back of a garden seat. One day. That was about twenty-five years ago.

I presume the corner had been a kind of rubbish tip for the house, a convenient means of disposal in a rural area – when did council refuse collections start? It is here the children, while damming a stream or making a den, found large quantities of china shards. The pieces here bigger than the oddments that could turn up anywhere when digging, always put to one side, later washed off, examined, played with in a sorting and matching game, then piled into old ice cream tubs to lie almost forgotten on a shelf in the garage or shed. A few years ago I put some of them in a small compartmented shelf unit on my studio wall – garden archaeology in an outdoor display case. From the same area of the garden came glass and ceramic bottles, often intact, bearing manufacturers' names: beer from Somerset, or lemonade and fruit juice from Maidstone, inexplicably branded 'Eiffel Tower', Milk of Magnesia, jam jars, Keiller marmalade pots. A few days ago following heavy rain a squashed tin that looked as if it had contained sardines lay in the ditch, a food, like Shiphams' paste (small ridged barrel-shaped jars) quite out of favour.

I think there may have been another place, closer to the house, near a small barn that once housed a cider press. Trying to dig a hole for a shrub next to this my spade hit metal repeatedly over such a big patch the planting plan had to be abandoned. It was a huge sheet of corrugated iron. Nearby, under the extended barn roof overhang, the surface is brick and rubble now, a base for the oil tank, but from nearby, around the compost and leaf mould heaps, have emerged more china and various small pieces of rusted metal from tools or machinery. Here a horse shoe, there a shoe iron. A door hinge, a gate fastening, a chain. Does more like this lie beneath that oil tank?

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